The Dynamics of Competitive Intervention: Multiplicity, Rivalry, and Civil War Duration

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Abstract

Civil wars often unfold amid complex networks of foreign involvement. Although prior research shows that two-sided interventions—where both governments and rebel groups receive external support—tend to prolong conflicts, it typically treats them as interactions between two unified camps, overlooking the distinct roles and linkages of individual intervening states. We argue that the structure of external competition—specifically, how intervening states are networked across opposing camps— fundamentally shapes conflict duration. The analysis introduces the concept of a competitive intervener dyads (CID), defined as pairs of states supporting opposite sides in a civil war. As the number of these dyads increases, the density of cross-camp competition rises, complicating bargaining and reducing the likelihood of settlement. Moreover, when CIDs consist of interstate rivals, mutual mistrust and antagonism further undermine credible commitments and intensify informational asymmetries, making peace even less attainable. Using global data on civil wars from 1975 to 2017, combined with measures of external support and interstate rivalry, we estimate Cox proportional hazards models to test these propositions. The results show that a higher number of CIDs significantly decreases the tendency of civil war to terminate, and that rivalry dyads exert particularly strong prolonging effects. These findings highlight how the configuration of external actors—not merely their presence—profoundly shapes the trajectory of civil wars, bridging research on foreign intervention, bargaining dynamics, and international rivalry.

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1. Introduction

Civil wars unfold within an international arena. Foreign states have intervened in 145 of 187 civil war episodes, and in nearly half of these cases—66 conflicts—both governments and rebel groups received external support (Meier et al., 2023). Existing research shows that these two-sided interventions often prolong civil wars (Regan, 2002; Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008; Aydin & Regan, 2012; Anderson, 2019; Alsaadi, 2023). By shifting the balance of resources and obscuring each side's capabilities and resolve, competitive interventions heighten uncertainty. At the same time, opposing foreign support undermines credible commitments, as the prospect of ongoing arms or financial assistance for both warring groups increases the risk of defection.

Yet civil conflicts with competitive interventions do not all follow the same trajectory. The Republic of the Congo's 1997 conflict, for example, ended in less than a year (Thom, 1999). Rebel forces under Denis Sassou-Nguesso received support from Angola, while President Pascal Lissouba relied on France and several regional states. The war reached a decisive outcome within months once foreign patrons became directly involved. By contrast, Afghanistan's war in the 1980s drew far more extensive outside participation: the Soviet Union and its allies supported the Kabul government, while the mujahideen were backed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China, and others (Giustozzi, 2000). In this case, external sponsorship persisted for years, fueling a decade-long conflict. Similar variation can be found elsewhere. In Sierra Leone, opposing external assistance from its African neighboring countries helped bring the war to a relatively quick close within a few years (Richards, 1998), whereas in Angola, alternating flows of U.S., Soviet, Cuban, and South African support kept the conflict alive for decades (Anderson, 2019). The Syrian civil war offers yet another example, where external support for opposing belligerents has contributed to its protracted nature (Phillips, 2020). These divergent outcomes point to a central question: when both sides receive foreign support, what features of external intervention explain why some

civil wars end quickly while others drag on?

In this paper, we argue that the way intervening states are networked, and thus the density of competition between opposing warring groups, fundamentally shapes the duration of civil wars. Civil wars with external involvement rarely feature a single patron on each side; instead, they often draw in multiple states with divergent interests, strategies, and levels of commitment (Cunningham, 2006, 2010; Maekawa, 2019). This multiplicity transforms the bargaining environment, making conflict resolution more complex than the conventional image of two monolithic camps negotiating over the terms of settlement. Specifically, within this multi-party context, the independent roles of intervening states become crucial. Each external supporter evaluates the adversary's capabilities, resolve, and credibility from its own perspective, rather than deferring to a unified assessment made by the domestic faction it backs (Findley & Teo, 2006; Cunningham, 2010; Maekawa, 2019). Because these states often provide the resources that sustain military operations and shape the political strategies of their allies (Regan, 2002; Pickering & Kisangani, 2006; Kaplow, 2016), their independent judgments directly influence the trajectory of bargaining. Thus, divergent assessments among interveners can produce inconsistent signals at the negotiation table, undermine internal consensus on whether and how to pursue peace, and increase the likelihood that potential agreements collapse.

We conceptualize this dynamic through the notion of a competitive intervener dyad (CID) —a pair of foreign states that back opposing sides in a civil war. Each CID introduces an additional layer of strategic perception, as intervening states independently assess the capabilities, motives, and credibility of their adversarial counterparts. This multiplicity of independent judgments creates potentially conflicting assessments among external actors about the opposing camp. As such, as the number of such dyads increases, the density of cross-camp competition intensifies, making bargaining more fragmented and coherent negotiation strategies more difficult to achieve. However, not all CIDs exert the same influence. We argue that rivalry dyads, in which interveners are drawn from preexisting interstate rivalries,

intensify bargaining problems even more. Rival states bring deep-seated mistrust, biased assessments, and skepticism about each other's commitments into the negotiation process (Thompson, 2001; Colaresi et al., 2008; Diehl et al., 2019). These antagonistic relationships heighten information asymmetries and amplify fears of defection or spoiling, thereby magnifying the obstacles already posed by competitive interventions. As a result, rival CIDs exert a particularly strong effect in prolonging civil wars compared to non-rival dyads.

We test our argument on a global sample of intrastate conflicts from 1975 to 2017, drawing on the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Davies et al., 2023). Conflict duration is modeled using Cox proportional hazards models. Our key explanatory variables come from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's External Support Dataset (Meier et al., 2023), which captures external assistance and enables us to construct measures of CIDs—cross-camp pairings between states that back opposing sides in a conflict. To assess whether rivalry dynamics intensify these effects, we link this measure with the peace dataset (Diehl et al., 2019), which identifies international rivalries among intervening states. The results provide support for our theory. Even after accounting for a range of controls, we find that civil wars are more likely to be prolonged as the number of CIDs increases. While the presence of additional interveners alone reduces the baseline hazard of conflict termination by roughly 5 percentage point per state, the structure of external competition proves more consequential: each additional CID lowers the hazard by about 7 percentage point. Moreover, rivalry dyads exert a larger effect, reducing the likelihood of war termination by approximately 31 percentage point, compared to only 8 percentage point for non-rival competitive intervention dyads. The results remain robust across alternative model specifications, the inclusion of country-level random effects, and analyses restricted to shorter civil wars.

Beyond uncovering the nuanced effects of two-sided interventions, this paper also extends existing scholarship on the role of foreign state actors in civil conflicts. A large body of research emphasizes how external involvement shapes civil war outcomes by altering the behavior of domestic combatants. For example, material support to rebel groups has been shown to

lengthen conflicts by hardening their bargaining positions (Byman et al., 2001; Schultz, 2010; Bapat, 2012). Even the expectation of foreign backing can influence negotiations by heightening uncertainty over battlefield outcomes (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005; Thyne, 2006; Toukan, 2019). We build on this literature by shifting the focus away from domestic actors and toward the direct role of intervening states themselves in shaping bargaining dynamics under conditions of competitive intervention. In addition, this paper contributes to research at the intersection of inter- and intra-state conflict. Prior studies have shown that interstate competition frequently spills into civil wars, reshaping their dynamics (Thyne, 2006; Toukan, 2019). Much of this work emphasizes rivalries between domestic governments and intervening states as drivers of conflict outcomes (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005; Pickering & Kisangani, 2006; Findley & Teo, 2006; Salehyan et al., 2011; Qiu, 2022). We extend this line of inquiry by theorizing how rivalries between intervening states themselves, rather than between a government and an outside patron, prolong the duration of civil wars.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it overviews how two-sided interventions influence civil war outcomes and reviews the existing literature. Second, it presents our theory of competitive interveners in civil war. Third, it tests the theory with a quantitative analysis of all civil wars fought between 1975 and 2017. Finally, it concludes by outlining the article's implications for researchers and the policy community.

2. Multiplicity in Competitive Interventions in Civil Wars

Civil wars in which external states intervene on opposing sides are often conceptualized as proxy wars, where domestic combatants become instruments of broader interstate competition. In such conflicts, outside powers delegate the costs of fighting to local actors while pursuing their own geopolitical, security, or economic objectives (Dunér, 1981; Hughes, 2012; Mumford, 2013; Anderson, 2019). Rather than isolated episodes of foreign involvement, two-sided interventions transform civil wars into internationalized arenas in which rival states

compete indirectly through their proxies. That is, the logic of proxy warfare underscores not only the material mechanisms of support, such as arms transfers or financial aid, but also the strategic interaction between opposing sponsors, whose rivalry entrenches local conflicts and alters the incentives of domestic actors.

Building on this perspective, scholars widely agree that opposing interventions prolong civil wars. Regan (2002) shows that counterinterventions preserve relative power balances, giving both governments and rebels incentives to hold out for victory or better bargaining terms. Likewise, Balch-Lindsay et al. (2008) demonstrate that balanced interventions complicate negotiations, since multiple external actors must agree for settlements to hold, making stalemate the most likely outcome. More recent scholarship further emphasizes that competitive interventions extend conflict by worsening the bargaining problems inherent to civil wars. Anderson (2019) notes that simultaneous support to both sides lowers the costs of fighting, increases uncertainty about relative resolve, and disrupts the convergence of expectations necessary for negotiation. Aydin & Regan (2012) likewise show that balancing interventions signal long-term commitment from external patrons, encouraging combatants to reject concessions and even exploit rival sponsors for additional resources. In a related vein, Alsaadi (2023) maintains that when external support is structured by geopolitical competition, incumbents harden their repressive strategies while opposition actors also receive backing, creating a cycle of escalation that reduces incentives for compromise[1].

Yet this literature largely overlooks variation within competitive interventions. Although scholars have employed a variety of terms to capture this phenomenon, such as "counter-intervention" (Regan, 2002), "balanced intervention" (Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008; Aydin & Regan, 2012), "competitive international involvement" (Alsaadi, 2023), and "competitive intervention" (Anderson, 2019; Schulhofer-Wohl, 2020), the common limitation of these approaches is that they conceptualize competition in binary terms. In other words, they focus primarily on whether or not both sides of a civil war receive external support, and then exam-

[1] Schulhofer-Wohl (2020) characterizes this result as a "quagmire," where civil wars become mired in prolonged stalemate precisely because external rivals are locked into competitive but restrained interventions.

ine how this dichotomous condition influences conflict duration. In doing so, this literature implicitly treats entire coalitions of intervening states as the relevant unit of analysis, thereby obscuring how the behavior of individual states, and the relationships that cut across opposing coalitions, can also shape the trajectory of civil wars[2].

Accounting for multiplicity highlights important variation within competitive interventions. Two-sided interventions rarely consist of just one supporter per side; instead, they almost always involve multiple states backing both governments and rebels. According to the Uppsala External Support Dataset, of 66 civil conflict episodes with two-sided interventions, 59 featured more than one external supporter per side (Meier et al., 2023). Relevantly, the historical record also reveals this pattern: competitive intervention is not simply a dyadic contest between two states but a multilayered struggle in which coalitions of interveners shape the trajectory and duration of wars. The Angolan civil war illustrates this dynamic vividly, with the MPLA backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba against UNITA's coalition of supporters that included the United States, South Africa, and regional allies. In Afghanistan during the 1980s, the Kabul regime was sustained by the Soviet Union and its partners, while the mujahideen drew resources from the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China. More recently, the Syrian civil war has demonstrated an even denser web of rival sponsorships, with the Assad government supported by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, and opposition forces aided by the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other regional and Western partners.

Broadly, research indicates that this multiparty involvement systematically lengthens civil wars by exacerbating bargaining problems. First, each additional state effectively adds a veto player with distinct preferences, shrinking the bargaining range and raising the odds that at least one actor blocks a deal (Cunningham, 2006, 2010). Second, more interveners also intensify informational problems: because most battles are dyadic, extra patrons widen asymmetries in beliefs about overall prospects, slow learning, and inject uncertainty about

[2] Aydin & Regan (2012) examine whether individual interveners align with both sides of a conflict (*balancing*) or with the same side (*bandwagoning*), but they operationalize this distinction in a dichotomous manner, coding each intervention at month t simply as involving *balancing* or *bandwagoning*.

how new resources translate into fighting capacity (Cunningham, 2010; Sawyer et al., 2017). Third, preference heterogeneity among supporters further undermines credible commitments, coalitions seldom act as unitary actors, and shifting interests heighten fears of defection from settlements (Maekawa, 2019; Kaplow, 2016). Taken together, as the number of interveners increases, the risks of divergent agendas, uncertainty, and defection grow, making negotiated resolutions less likely and extending the duration of civil wars.

In this paper, we bridge insights from the proxy war and multiparty intervention literatures by introducing a framework that shifts the focus from coalitions to the interactions between individual intervening states. Once we account for the multiplicity of actors typically present in two-sided interventions, civil wars appear less as contests between two cohesive blocs and more as arenas of competition among individual states situated across opposing camps. This perspective makes it possible to capture within-variation in competitive interventions, highlighting how the density and configuration of cross-camp rivalries shape bargaining dynamics and, ultimately, the duration of civil wars.

3. Competitive Intervener Dyads and Civil War Duration

We build on the bargaining model of war to explain how competitive interventions influence the duration of civil wars. Unlike much of the existing literature, however, we move beyond the assumption that the opposing camps of governments and rebels act as unitary actors in evaluating one another. Instead, we emphasize the independent roles of external interveners within multiparty interventions.

Each intervening state enters a civil war with its own strategic objectives, which may stem from geopolitical ambitions, regional security concerns, ideological affinities, or economic interests. As a result, interveners' assessments of the conflict are not necessarily aligned with those of the domestic combatants they support, nor are they always consistent with other external states on the same side of the war (Findley & Teo, 2006; Cunningham, 2010; Maekawa,

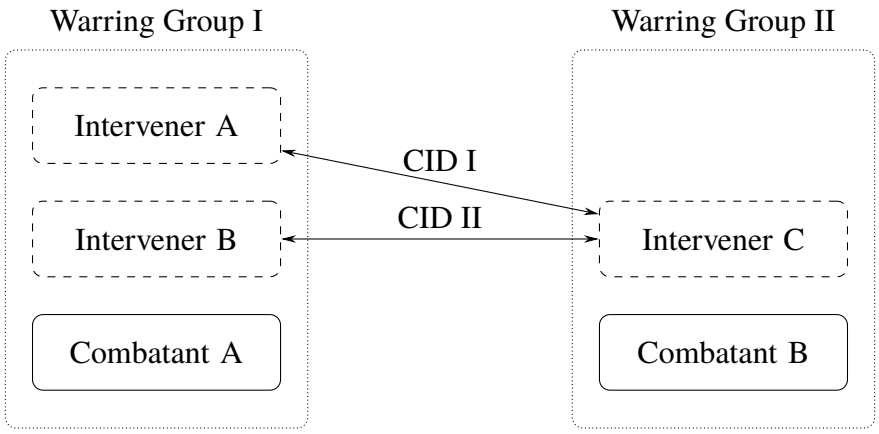
2019). For example, while a rebel group may focus primarily on gaining political control within the state, an external patron may be more concerned with countering a rival power or securing access to strategic resources. This misalignment can produce differences in how each actor interprets the adversary's strength, resolve, and willingness to bargain, thereby complicating the ability of coalitions to formulate unified strategies.

Although interveners are external to the civil conflict, their role is not merely peripheral; they often exercise substantial leverage over the strategies and bargaining positions of their local allies. Material support, such as weapons, funding, or diplomatic cover, gives interveners the ability to shape whether governments and rebels continue fighting or pursue negotiations (Regan, 2002; Pickering & Kisangani, 2006; Kaplow, 2016). Because domestic actors rely heavily on external assistance, they must take into account their patrons' preferences and expectations when making strategic decisions. This means that interveners' judgments about the adversary's capabilities, resolve, and credibility often feed directly into the bargaining process, effectively altering the calculations of the supported side.

Moreover, intervening states may consider those in the opposing faction as the primary targets of their evaluations. Civil wars often provide an additional arena for third-party states to compete with each other. For instance, interstate conflicts occur as the result of a state's attempt to influence the outcome of civil wars through intervention (Gleditsch et al., 2008), and interventions that support the opposing internal belligerents are understood as the extension of conflicts between states at the international level (Anderson, 2019). In order to win or survive in such competition, intervening states need to closely evaluate the commitment of their counterparts supporting the opposing side, which includes assessing the level of military and financial support these counterparts are willing to provide, as well as their reliability in adhering to potential negotiated agreements. These assessments could vary among different pairs of interveners because they are rooted in the unique nature of the relationships between the states involved. Therefore, the participation of third-party states introduces a layer of complexity to the bargaining processes in civil wars, expanding the range of assessments that

influence the dynamics of civil war bargaining.

Figure 1: Competitive Intervener Dyads in Two-sided Civil War Interventions



We emphasize this distinct roles of intervening states in multiparty civil wars by introducing the concept of a *competitive intervener dyad (CID)*. A CID refers to a pair of external states that simultaneously provide military support to opposing domestic combatants. It is competitive insofar as these states pursue conflicting interests through their backing of rival factions. Figure 1 illustrates this logic: two domestic warring groups (Combatant A and B) each receive support from multiple external patrons. The dashed boxes represent individual interveners, who attach themselves to different sides of the war. CIDs are formed when interveners across the divide directly oppose each other—for example, Intervener A and Intervener C form CID I, while Intervener B and Intervener C form CID II. This depiction highlights how a single civil war with a two-sided intervention can generate multiple CIDs, each representing a distinct channel of cross-camp rivalry.

The historical record underscores that CIDs have played pivotal roles in shaping the course of civil wars. In Angola, the military and diplomatic confrontation between Cuba and South Africa over the MPLA and UNITA, respectively, not only escalated the intensity of the conflict but also shaped its eventual resolution through the Tripartite Accord of 1988 (Polack, 2013). Similarly, the Yemen Civil War illustrates how CIDs can prolong and complicate conflict dynamics: the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has entrenched the fighting

by sustaining opposing factions, while at the same time their shifting strategies and negotiations, such as Iran's March 2023 pledge to halt military support for the Houthis, have opened windows of de-escalation (Gallagher et al., 2023; Ghobari, 2023).

We argue that the increase in the number of CIDs contributes to the prolongation of civil wars by complicating a bargaining process. First, a CID can foster internal discord over the conditions of a potential negotiated settlement. Achieving a unified stance on the opposing faction's capabilities, resolve, and credibility is essential for initiating discussions on a ceasefire. The absence of a consensus on these critical attributes makes it difficult for the warring group to finalize a collective decision on whether to persist in combat or to engage in negotiations. The presence of a CID complicates the attainment of such a consensus, as intervening states involved in a CID tend to form their distinct evaluations of each other, leading to greater internal variance in how the adversary is evaluated. This increased divergence in views within the faction can obstruct the path to agreeing on peace negotiations, thus extending the conflict.

Second, CIDs also intensify the information problem that already complicates civil war bargaining. In principle, fighting provides information about relative capabilities and resolve, allowing expectations to converge over time and paving the way for a negotiated settlement (Fearon, 1995). Yet when multiple CIDs are present, this information becomes more fragmented and ambiguous. Each intervener has incentives to exaggerate the strength of its proxy or conceal the extent of its own commitment in order to deter the adversary and gain bargaining leverage. Because individual battles are fought primarily between local actors, their outcomes reveal little about the broader distribution of capabilities once foreign sponsors are factored in. Competitive interveners may also deliberately distort signals, by escalating or withholding support, to mislead their counterparts across the civil war divide. This multiplicity of cross-camp interactions creates layers of uncertainty that prevent combatants and their patrons from forming accurate assessments of each other's strength, thereby prolonging the conflict.

Finally, CIDs aggravate the commitment problem inherent in civil war bargaining. Even

when warring coalitions identify a potential bargain, the deep mistrust between interveners within the dyad undermines the credibility of any agreement. Each state fears that its counterpart will renege once conditions change, either by renewing military aid, covertly arming its proxy, or obstructing implementation of a ceasefire. These fears extend to domestic allies as well: governments and rebels backed by powerful patrons anticipate that the adversary's sponsor may act as a spoiler, which makes them reluctant to disarm or offer concessions. The involvement of multiple CIDs reinforces this risk, since each additional dyad introduces another set of relationships in which commitments may be doubted. As a result, settlements that might otherwise be viable are seen as fragile and reversible, lowering incentives to compromise and increasing the likelihood that conflicts persist.

> ***H1**: Civil wars involving more competitive intervener dyads will endure longer than those with fewer dyads.*

4. Rivalry Dynamics within Competitive Intervener Dyads

Our focus now turns to interstate dynamics within a CID and how they explain the heterogeneous effects of two-sided interventions. A CID consists of two states backing opposing factions in a civil war. Yet, the mere fact of supporting different sides does not necessarily imply that the intervening states are locked in hostility. While such alignments can signal a proxy war in which the civil conflict becomes a venue for interstate rivalry (Anderson, 2019), they may also arise from preexisting ties with domestic groups or more limited regional strategic interests.

A key factor shaping interstate behavior within CIDs is the presence of international rivalry. Rivalries are defined by enduring military confrontations (Diehl & Goertz, 2001) and mutual recognition of adversarial status (Colaresi et al., 2008), rooted in deep conflicts of national interest. These entrenched perceptions predispose states to biases such as misper-

ception (Jervis, 1976) and mistrust (Maoz & Mor, 2002), which shape how rivals engage not only in direct disputes but also in civil war interventions. When rival states form a CID, their antagonism filters into civil war bargaining, heightening the challenges of information sharing and credible commitment.

First, rivalry magnifies the informational problems that already plague civil wars. In intrastate conflicts, states often exaggerate their military strength or the capabilities of their local partners to improve their bargaining positions. When rivals are involved in a CID, this tendency becomes more severe. Rival states may deliberately conceal or distort information about the scale, type, or sustainability of their support in order to mislead the opposing sponsor and extract concessions in their broader interstate competition. This deliberate manipulation increases uncertainty not only between the intervening states but also for the domestic combatants, who must interpret conflicting signals about their chances of victory. The result is a more opaque bargaining environment where expectations fail to converge, reducing the prospects for timely negotiation or settlement.

Second, rivalry also exacerbates commitment problems. Even when warring parties and their patrons can identify a potential bargain, the deep mistrust inherent in rivalries makes it difficult for states to believe that their adversary will uphold the terms of a settlement. Rival states are predisposed to view agreements as temporary or insincere, fostering persistent fears that the opponent will renege once circumstances shift. This skepticism extends to the civil war setting, where rivals may expect their adversary to undermine ceasefires, channel renewed support to proxies, or act as spoilers in the peace process. Such fears discourage states and their domestic allies from making concessions or demobilizing, since doing so exposes them to betrayal. In this way, rivalry within CIDs reinforces both informational and commitment barriers to peace, prolonging the duration of civil wars.

In sum, we expect that this hostile dynamic magnifies the effects of CIDs on civil war duration. While CIDs generally complicate bargaining by fostering divergent assessments within warring coalitions, the involvement of rivals adds another layer of bias. Rival states

are prone to interpret each other's capabilities and commitments in systematically adversarial ways, creating divisions not only across camps but also within coalitions over how to respond to the adversary. These divergences reduce the likelihood of consensus on negotiation strategies and peace initiatives, thereby increasing the probability that civil wars involving rival CIDs will be prolonged.

> ***H2**: The prolonging effect of competitive intervener dyads on civil war duration will be stronger when the intervening states are rivals than when they are not.*

5. Research Design

5.1. Data and Sample

We test our hypotheses by conducting a statistical analysis of all civil wars fought between 1975 and 2017. To identify relevant cases, we draw on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset (UCDP/PRIO ACD), a widely used source for conflict research. This dataset defines armed conflict as "a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year" (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Davies et al., 2023). Accordingly, the unit of analysis is intrastate conflicts that reached at least twenty-five fatalities in a given year between 1975 and 2017, providing a comprehensive cross-national sample for empirical testing.

Our dependent variable is the duration of conflict episodes, measured in days until a particular conflict outcome is reached within a conflict year. We calculate this variable using the start and end dates reported in the UCDP/PRIO ACD. The onset of a conflict is recorded once the UCDP/PRIO ACD criteria are satisfied, while termination occurs when a conflict

no longer meets these criteria for a full year. This approach captures both the dynamics of prolonged wars and shorter episodes of violence, allowing us to examine variation across conflicts in their likelihood of ending. As a result, our dataset is structured as a cross-national time-series, in which conflict-years serve as the temporal unit and both conflict-specific and time-varying covariates can be incorporated into the analysis.

Given the nature of our dependent variable, we employ a semi-parametric Cox proportional hazards model. This model is well-suited for analyzing duration data because it does not require specifying the baseline hazard function and can accommodate right-censoring, which is common in ongoing or unresolved conflicts. More importantly, the Cox model enables us to evaluate the effect of time-varying covariates on the hazard of conflict termination. In other words, our models estimate the rate at which conflicts end in year t, conditional on the history of the conflict up to that point and the characteristics of both the conflict and its international environment (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 1997). This allows us to assess how our explanatory variables shape the probability that a civil war comes to an end, while accounting for temporal dependencies in the data.

5.2. Independent Variables

To construct our key independent variables, we rely on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's External Support Dataset (UCDP ESD) (Meier et al., 2023), which provides annual information on external assistance from foreign states to governments or rebel groups in ongoing conflicts. The dataset records a wide range of support types, including weapons and ammunition transfers, financial aid, territorial access, direct military operations, war material, logistical assistance, training, access to military infrastructure, intelligence sharing, recruitment, gun running, and harboring, thus capturing both material and non-material dimensions of external involvement. States are coded as interveners when they provide any of these forms of assistance to a conflict party listed in the UCDP/PRIO ACD. The UCDP ESD differentiates

between substantiated and alleged cases of support; in order to maintain reliability and reduce measurement error, our analysis excludes alleged cases and relies only on substantiated evidence.

Our dataset identifies 1,261 instances of third-party intervention across 1,677 conflict-years. Governments are the more frequent recipients of external support, with 995 cases, compared to 806 cases of aid directed toward rebel groups. Of these interventions, 721 are one-sided, where only one party, the government or the rebels, receives support, while 540 are two-sided, in which both sides obtain external assistance. On average, each instance of external support involves 4.5 intervening states.[3] The scale of support also varies systematically: governments tend to attract more third-party backers (an average of 4.2 interveners) than rebel groups (1.85), and conflicts with two-sided interventions see considerably larger numbers of interveners on average (5.81) compared to one-sided interventions (3.52).

The primary independent variable in our analysis is the count of competitive intervener dyads (CIDs), which captures the extent of cross-cutting external involvement in a conflict year. CIDs are defined as unique dyadic pairings between states that support opposing sides in a civil war. We calculate the count of this variable by multiplying the number of states assisting the government by the number of states backing rebel groups. This operationalization reflects the degree of international competition embedded within a conflict, as each dyad represents a potential site of confrontation between foreign actors. Our dataset records 4,087 instances of competitive intervener dyads across 540 observations of two-sided interventions. While the average number of competitive intervener dyads per observation within two-sided intervention is 2.824, the distribution is highly skewed: the median is 3, and nearly three-quarters of the observations include fewer than 5 dyads. The civil war in Afghanistan in 2014 represents the case with the highest number of competitive intervener dyads. In this conflict, the Government of Afghanistan was backed by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and 46 other countries, while the Taliban received support from Russia,

[3]Most cases involve only one (389) or two (254) interveners, though the number can be much higher; for example, the Mali War in 2015 recorded 64 external supporters.

Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

We also examine the effects of the types of competitive intervener dyads, distinguishing between those with rivalry ties and those without. Our expectation is that competitive intervener dyads with rivalry ties are more strongly associated with prolonged civil war duration. We draw on the "peace dataset" (Diehl et al., 2019), which codes international rivalries up to 2015 and differentiates between severe rivalries, where states consistently view one another as enemies and engage in frequent hostile interactions (Colaresi et al., 2008), and lesser rivalries, where conflict intensity and frequency are lower but unresolved issues, mutual distrust, and occasional militarized or diplomatic hostilities persist. We include both severe and lesser rivalries in the data to capture the full spectrum of rivalry dynamics.

Our dataset shows that out of 540 conflict-year observations with two-sided interventions, 303 involve international rivalries. Among these cases, the majority feature either one rivalry dyad (144 instances) or two rivalry dyads (105), while larger numbers of rivalries are comparatively rare. The maximum observed is seven rivalry dyads, which occurred during the Iraqi civil war between 1973 and 1983. In this case, the Iraqi government received support from Turkey, France, the Soviet Union, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, while the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) were backed by Iran and Syria.

5.3. Control Variables

We control for several factors that may confound the relationship between our main explanatory variables and civil war duration. National-level characteristics may shape both the likelihood of external involvement and the persistence of conflict. Previous research links a country's political and economic conditions to the length of civil wars (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Gurr, 2000). Regime type, in particular, can affect conflict dynamics, as democratic and autocratic governments differ in their institutional constraints, accountability mechanisms,

and approaches to negotiation. To account for these effects, we include a country's Polity score from the Polity IV dataset (Marshall & Gurr, 2020), which ranges from –10 (fully autocratic) to 10 (fully democratic). State capacity may also influence both intervention and conflict duration, since weaker states tend to have less control over territory and may invite external interference. We therefore include the log of GDP per capita, drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2024), as a proxy for state capacity. Additionally, we control for population size and mountainous terrain (Fearon & Laitin, 2003), as demographic scale and challenging geography can prolong conflict and shape the feasibility of intervention.

Conflict-level characteristics are also important determinants of duration. Conflicts involving territorial claims often last longer than those fought over control of the central government, as secessionist or autonomy-seeking groups tend to be more organized and resilient. We capture this using the incompatibility variable from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Davies et al., 2023), coded 1 for conflicts involving any territorial issue and 0 otherwise. Also, temporal and structural factors may influence the intensity and duration of civil wars. We include a Cold War dummy variable (1 if the conflict occurred during the Cold War, 0 otherwise) to capture the broader geopolitical context, which often shaped both the nature of external involvement and the endurance of conflicts (Anderson, 2019).

Finally, we include variables capturing the characteristics of external interventions that may independently shape civil war duration. Specifically, we control for the number of interveners involved in each conflict, as the presence of multiple external actors can complicate coordination among allies, intensify competition, and increase resource inflows, all of which may prolong fighting (Cunningham, 2006, 2010). To measure this, we use a count of distinct intervening states on either side of each conflict-year from the UCDP External Support Dataset (Meier et al., 2023). We also include a variable indicating whether the United States and Russia (or the Soviet Union) intervened on opposing sides. Great-power rivalry interventions can exacerbate conflict intensity and reduce the likelihood of negotiated settlement, as

both patrons often sustain their respective clients through material and diplomatic support. The U.S.–Russia rivalry intervention variable is coded 1 when both powers intervene on opposite sides in a given conflict-year and 0 otherwise, capturing the distinctive influence of superpower competition on the duration of civil wars.

6. Results

Table 1 shows the outcomes of the Cox models, which estimate the effect of covariates on the survival of civil conflicts, such that more negative coefficients indicate a shorter duration of war. To test *H1*, we examine the impact of competitive intervener dyads (CIDs)—pairs of states that support opposing sides in a civil war—on conflict duration. The first two columns (*Model 1* and *Model 2*) evaluate this theoretical expectation, both with and without control variables, and provide supportive evidence for our argument. Across both specifications, the number of CIDs is negatively associated with the hazard of war termination, indicating that greater cross-camp competition prolongs conflict. Substantively, results from the full model suggest that each additional CID reduces the likelihood of civil war termination by approximately 10.5 percent, relative to cases without such competitive interventions. This result demonstrates that it is the structure and density of external competition, rather than the mere involvement of foreign states, that plays a crucial role in shaping the duration of civil wars.

The next analysis explores how international rivalries influence the duration of civil wars. As outlined in *H2*, rivalries between intervening states are expected to amplify the prolonging effect of CIDs. In Table 1, *Models 3* and *Model 4* provide empirical support for this expectation, both with and without country- and conflict-level controls. The coefficients for both types of CIDs—with and without rivalries—are negative and statistically significant, indicating that greater cross-camp competition is associated with longer wars. However, the effect of rival CIDs is more than twice as large as that of non-rival CIDs. Specifically, *Model 4*

shows that each additional CID involving rival interveners corresponds to a 29 percent reduction in the baseline hazard of civil war termination—more than double the 10.5 percent decrease observed for non-rival CIDs. This notable difference underscores the unique role of interstate rivalry: when interveners are historical adversaries, their mutual distrust and antagonism intensify the information and commitment problems that already impede conflict resolution.

Table 1: Statistical Models with Cox Estimates on Civil War Duration

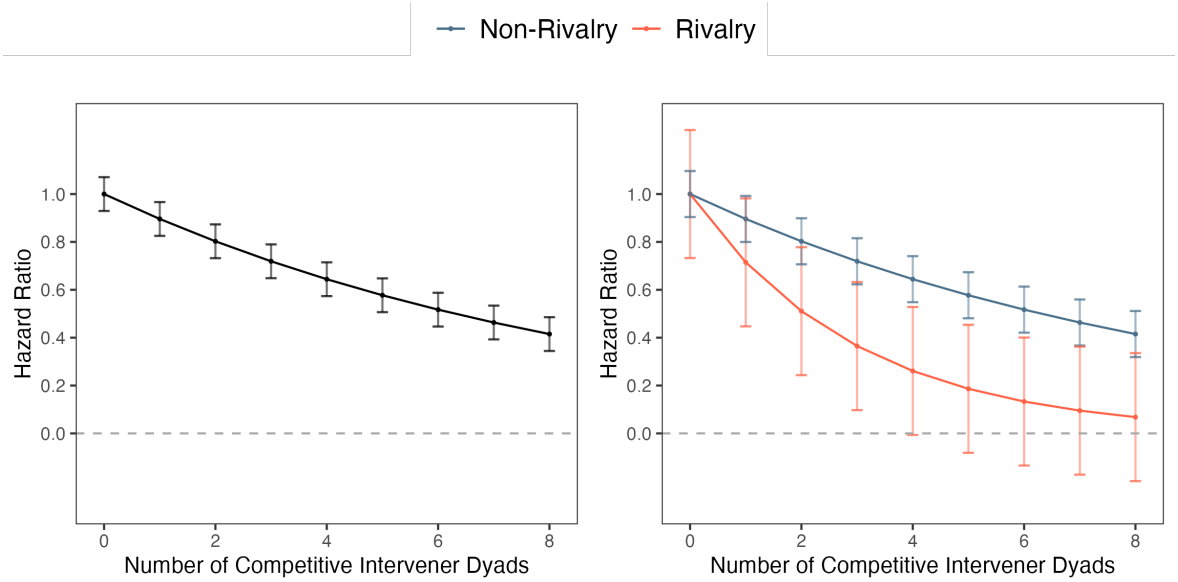
	DV: Civil War Termination			
	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*
Number of CIDs	-0.12^{***}	-0.11^{***}		
	(0.04)	(0.04)		
Number of Rivalry CIDs			-0.38^{***}	-0.34^{**}
			(0.13)	(0.14)
Number of Non-rivalry CIDs			-0.11^{**}	-0.11^{**}
			(0.05)	(0.05)
One-sided Intervention	-0.12	-0.15	-0.16	-0.18
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.13)
Log GDP per capita		0.06		0.05
		(0.04)		(0.05)
Log Population		-0.13^{***}		-0.14^{***}
		(0.04)		(0.04)
Polity Level		-0.34		-0.31
		(0.22)		(0.24)
Mountainous Terrain		0.03		-0.01
		(0.04)		(0.05)
Territorial Conflict		0.19		0.22^{*}
		(0.12)		(0.13)
Cold War		-0.83^{***}		-0.77^{***}
		(0.14)		(0.15)
Number of Conflict Episodes	328	323	303	298
Number of Observations	1677	1665	1574	1564
AIC	3251.47	3152.93	2950.90	2840.49

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 2 illustrates more vividly how the impact of CIDs on civil war duration varies depending on the presence of international rivalries. The graph on the left-hand side confirms that an increase in the number of CIDs is associated with a lower hazard of civil war termi-

nation, consistent with the main results. This pattern suggests that as external competition intensifies, conflicts become progressively more resistant to resolution. In contrast, the graph on the right-hand side shows that this effect is far more pronounced when rivalries are involved: CIDs characterized by rivalry (red) exhibit a sharper decline in the hazard rate as the number of interveners increases, compared to non-rival CIDs (blue). For instance, when four rival CIDs are present, the hazard of civil war termination falls to 0.36, compared to 0.72 in conflicts with two non-rival CIDs—indicating that rival interventions roughly double the expected duration of war. This statistically significant difference highlights how rivalries among external interveners amplify the conflict-prolonging effects of competitive interventions.

Figure 2: Comparison between the Effects of Rivalry and Non-rivalry CIDs



Note: The coefficient bars in the graph represent 95% confidence intervals.

One potential concern is whether the effects of CIDs remain robust once we account for the overall number of intervening states in a conflict. As the number of interveners increases, the number of potential dyadic pairings between states supporting opposing sides also tends to rise—producing a positive but not perfect correlation between the two variables (r = 0.61). This imperfect relationship exists because the addition of a new intervener does not always generate the same number of new CIDs or the same level of competition. When the additional

state joins the side that already has more interveners, it expands the existing network of one camp without substantially changing the balance of competition. However, if the new state joins the weaker side, it increases the degree of cross-camp competition by equalizing the number of supporters on each front. In the second scenario, the number of CIDs grows more rapidly than in the first. Because the effect of an additional intervener depends on how it reshapes the competitive structure between camps, the inclusion of the number of interveners as a control provides a stringent test of whether the influence of CIDs captures a unique dimension of external competition beyond simply the scale of foreign involvement.

To assess this possibility, Table 2 presents two models that include the number of interveners as an additional control variable. *Model 5* tests *H1* concerning the general effect of CIDs on civil war duration, and the results continue to support our theoretical expectation. Even after accounting for the number of intervening states, the coefficient for the CID variable remains negative and statistically significant, confirming its conflict-prolonging effect. Notably, this influence is stronger than that of adding another intervener: while each additional foreign supporter reduces the hazard of civil war termination by about 3 percentage points, the presence of an additional CID lowers it by roughly 8 percentage points—more than twice as much. Including the number of interveners also does not alter the results for *H2*. As shown in *Model 6*, rival CIDs continue to exert a significant and stronger effect on prolonging civil wars compared to non-rival CIDs. This pattern underscores that what drives longer conflicts is not merely how many states intervene, but how they are positioned relative to one another across opposing camps.

Another potential concern is that the observed effects of CIDs might be driven disproportionately by a single, highly influential rivalry. In particular, the U.S.–Russia rivalry stands out as a potentially confounding factor, given its historical prominence and frequency in shaping international interventions. Among the 539 two-sided interventions in the dataset, 53 involve this dyad, making it the most recurrent rivalry pair. Because U.S.–Russia confrontations often carry broader geopolitical implications—such as ideological polarization, global

power balancing, and proxy competition—their presence could amplify the duration of civil wars in ways not representative of other rivalries. To address this possibility, we estimate additional models that include a binary variable capturing U.S.–Russia rivalry, coded as 1 when both states intervene on opposing sides in a given conflict and 0 otherwise. This allows us to assess whether our main findings hold once the unique influence of this historically dominant rivalry is explicitly accounted for.

Table 2: Statistical Models with Additional Controls of External Intervention

	DV: Civil War Termination					
	Model 5	*Model 6*	*Model 7*	*Model 8*	*Model 9*	*Model 10*
Number of CIDs	-0.08^{**}		-0.11^{***}		-0.08^{**}	
	(0.04)		(0.04)		(0.04)	
Number of Rivalry CIDs		-0.32^{**}		-0.39^{**}		-0.37^{**}
		(0.14)		(0.15)		(0.15)
Number of Non-rivalry CIDs		-0.09^{*}		-0.11^{**}		-0.10^{*}
		(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)
One-sided Intervention	-0.07	-0.14	-0.15	-0.19	-0.07	-0.16
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)
Number of Interveners	-0.03^{*}	-0.02			-0.03^{*}	-0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)			(0.02)	(0.02)
US-Russia Rivalry			-0.18	0.49	-0.17	0.49
			(0.53)	(0.58)	(0.54)	(0.58)
Control Variables	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Conflict Episodes	323	298	323	298	323	298
Number of Observation	1665	1564	1665	1564	1665	1564
AIC	3149.75	2859.25	3154.81	2860.13	3151.65	2860.60

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Models 7 and *Model 8* incorporate the U.S.–Russia rivalry variable to test whether our findings are driven by this dominant dyad. The results continue to support our theoretical expectations. In *Model 7*, the coefficient for the number of CIDs remains negative and statistically significant, indicating that the increasing intensity of competitive interventions overall continue to prolong civil wars even after accounting for the U.S.–Russia rivalry. More importantly, *Model 8* shows that the distinction between rival and non-rival CIDs persists—and the gap between their effects becomes even larger than in the baseline models. This sug-

gests that the prolonging influence of rival CIDs is not attributed solely to the dynamics of the U.S.–Russia relationship but reflects a broader pattern of how rivalry structures external competition in civil wars. *Models 9* and *10* further show that our theoretical arguments remain robust after controlling for both the number of interveners and the U.S.–Russia rivalry.

7. Robustness Check

To evaluate the robustness of our results, we conduct several supplementary analyses. First, we estimate alternative model specifications using parametric survival models with Weibull and exponential distributions. While the main analysis relies on the semi-parametric Cox proportional hazards model, which does not specify the functional form of the baseline hazard, parametric models explicitly define how the hazard evolves over time. The exponential model assumes a constant hazard rate, whereas the Weibull model allows it to increase or decrease monotonically as the conflict unfolds. These specifications impose a stronger structural assumption on time dependence, enabling us to assess whether the estimated effects of external interventions on civil war duration are sensitive to the underlying hazard shape. Consistent findings across the Cox, Weibull, and exponential models would strengthen confidence that the results are not an artifact of the baseline hazard specification but instead reflect a robust relationship between intervention rivalry and the persistence of civil wars.

Table 3 presents the results from the parametric survival models. *Model 11* and *Model 12* employ the Weibull distribution, which allows the hazard rate to vary monotonically over time. Unlike the Cox model, the positive coefficients in these models suggest that an increase in the number of CIDs is associated with a longer duration of civil wars.[4] *Model 13* and *Model 14* apply the exponential distribution, which assumes a constant hazard rate over

[4]In Weibull models, the coefficients are expressed in terms of the log of the duration rather than the log of the hazard as in the Cox proportional hazards model. Consequently, the direction of interpretation is reversed: a positive coefficient indicates a longer expected duration (i.e., a lower hazard of conflict termination), whereas a negative coefficient indicates a shorter duration (i.e., a higher hazard).

Table 3: Statistical Models with Parametric Survival Distributions

	DV: Civil War Termination			
	(1) Weibull Model		(2) Exponential Model	
	Model 11	*Model 12*	*Model 13*	*Model 14*
Number of CIDs	0.17^{***}		-0.16^{***}	
	(0.05)		(0.04)	
Number of Rivalry CIDs		0.62^{***}		-0.51^{***}
		(0.20)		(0.14)
Number of Non-rivalry CIDs		0.09^{*}		-0.09^{**}
		(0.05)		(0.04)
One-sided Intervention	0.17	0.23	-0.15	-0.19
	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Control Variables	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Conflict Episodes	323	323	323	323
Number of Observation	1665	1665	1665	1665
AIC	5285.21	5280.28	5376.99	5370.37

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

time. Similar to the Cox model, negative coefficients in the exponential model indicate a prolonging effect on civil wars. Across both the Weibull and exponential specifications, the results remain consistent with the main findings: the number of CIDs is positively correlated with civil war duration, and this effect is even stronger than that observed in the Cox proportional hazards model. Moreover, interventions involving rivalries exert a statistically larger effect on prolonging conflicts compared to non-rivalry interventions, further reinforcing our theoretical expectations.

For the second robustness check, we employ a random-effects (frailty) Cox model to account for unobserved heterogeneity across countries in the duration of civil wars. This approach introduces a country-level random term to the baseline hazard, allowing each country to have its own underlying propensity for conflicts to persist or end quickly. Such heterogeneity likely reflects time-invariant characteristics—such as institutional capacity, geographic constraints, or colonial history—that influence both the likelihood of foreign interventions and civil war duration but are not fully captured by observable covariates. Modeling this variation is crucial because it reduces omitted-variable bias that could confound the estimated

effects of intervention rivalry. Compared to clustering standard errors, which only adjusts inference without modeling the source of dependence, the random-effects model explicitly incorporates cross-country differences into the hazard structure. Also, unlike a fixed-effects specification, it retains both within- and between-country variation, enabling estimation of country-level variables and inclusion of states with a single observed conflict. This makes the random-effects model a theoretically and empirically appropriate choice for analyzing how external interventions shape the duration of civil wars across diverse national contexts.

Table 4: Statistical Models with Random Effects and Limited Civil War Duration

	DV: Civil War Termination			
	(1) Random Effects Model		(2) Duration $<$ 10 yrs	
	Model 15	*Model 16*	*Model 17*	*Model 18*
Number of CID	-0.11^{***}		-0.10^{***}	
	(0.04)		(0.04)	
Number of Rivalry CID		-0.34^{**}		-0.33^{**}
		(0.14)		(0.15)
Number of Non-rivalry CID		-0.11^{**}		-0.09^{*}
		(0.05)		(0.05)
One-sided Intervention	-0.15	-0.18	-0.13	-0.16
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)
Cold War	-0.83^{***}	-0.77^{***}	-0.57^{***}	-0.52^{***}
Control Variables	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Conflict Episodes	323	298	285	263
Number of Observation	1665	1564	1163	1087
AIC	3152.93	2858.77	2915.27	2639.57

*p$<$0.1; **p$<$0.05; ***p$<$0.01

Table 4 presents the results from the random-effects Cox proportional hazards models that incorporate country-level frailty terms. textitModel 15 and *Model 16* account for unobserved heterogeneity across countries by allowing each state to have its own baseline propensity for conflict termination. The findings from *Model 15* support our first hypothesis, the coefficient for the number of CIDs is negative and statistically significant, indicating that as the number of opposing external interventions increases, the hazard of civil war termination decreases—that is, conflicts tend to last longer. *Model 16* disaggregates this effect by distinguishing between rivalry and non-rivalry CIDs. The results reveal that both types of interventions are associated

with prolonged civil wars, but the magnitude of the effect is notably larger for rivalry CIDs, supporting our second hypothesis. Overall, these findings suggest that even after accounting for unobserved, country-specific characteristics, the relationship between intervention rivalry and extended civil war duration remains robust and substantively meaningful.

Finally, as an additional robustness check, we restrict the sample to civil wars lasting less than ten years to ensure that the results are not driven by a small number of unusually long conflicts. Prolonged wars often exhibit fundamentally different dynamics than shorter ones: they may involve entrenched stalemates, shifting intervention patterns, or evolving political contexts that alter the incentives for both domestic and external actors. Such extensive conflicts can disproportionately influence parameter estimates in duration models, potentially overstating or distorting the effect of external interventions on war persistence. By excluding these extreme cases, the analysis focuses on conflicts whose temporal dynamics are more comparable and consistent with the assumptions of the survival model.

Model 17 and *Model 18* in Table 4 present the results based on this restricted sample of civil wars lasting less than ten years. The results remain consistent with those from the full-sample analysis. The number of CIDs continues to exhibit a significant negative association with the hazard of civil war termination, indicating that external interventions on opposing sides prolong conflicts even among relatively shorter wars. Moreover, the disaggregated results show that rivalry CIDs retain a substantially larger negative effect compared to non-rivalry CIDs, reinforcing the argument that rival-state involvement deepens conflict persistence. The similarity in coefficient magnitude and significance across both samples demonstrates that the main findings are not driven by a few extreme, long-lasting wars, but rather reflect a generalizable pattern linking intervention rivalry to extended civil war duration.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined how multiparty interventions shape the duration of civil wars by introducing the concept of a competitive intervener dyad (CID). Rather than treating foreign involvement as a binary condition of whether both sides receive support, our framework highlights that each pair of opposing interveners constitutes a distinct channel of competition that influences the bargaining process. We argue that as the number of CIDs increases, bargaining becomes more fragmented, information more distorted, and commitments less credible, thereby prolonging conflicts. Also, this effects become larger when the related states are marked with rivalry relationships.

Our empirical analysis provides robust support for this claim. Drawing on global data from 1975 to 2017, we show that additional interveners in general reduce the likelihood of civil war termination, but the configuration of those interventions matters even more: each CID lowers the hazard of termination more substantially than a simple count of interveners. Moreover, we demonstrate that CIDs involving rival states exert especially strong prolonging effects, as preexisting hostility magnifies misperceptions and mistrust in civil war bargaining. These findings underscore that it is not just the presence of outside actors, but the structure of their competitive relationships, that conditions civil war trajectories.

This study makes two broader contributions to the study of conflict. First, it shifts attention from domestic combatants to the interstate dynamics embedded in civil wars, showing how the independent assessments and rivalries of foreign patrons shape bargaining outcomes. Second, it integrates insights from the civil war and international rivalry literatures, demonstrating that civil wars often function as arenas of interstate competition, where rivalries spill over and entrench local violence. By conceptualizing multiparty interventions through CIDs, we uncover important within-variation in how two-sided interventions affect war duration.

Our findings carry implications for policymakers and peacebuilders. While interventions are sometimes justified as tools to stabilize conflicts or encourage negotiations, our results

caution that competitive interventions, especially those involving rival states, tend to have the opposite effect. Effective conflict management thus requires not only addressing the preferences of domestic combatants but also mitigating the competitive dynamics among external patrons. Cooperative frameworks that reduce interstate rivalry may be a necessary precondition for interventions to support peace rather than prolong war.

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